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THE RELATION OF AMOS AND HOSEA TO PRESENT-DAY PREACHING

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The application of the historical method to the study of the prophets Amos and Hosea has resulted in some changes in our view of the metaphysical teaching to be found in their writings. The modern preacher who has marked carefully the "secondary" passages, due to later editorial revision, will no longer dwell upon Amos and Hosea as originators and preachers of monotheism or even of universal ethics, thus putting these prophets' teaching, in that respect, on a level with the teaching of Jesus. Nor will he dwell upon their "thus saith the Lord" as the final evidence of their close and mystical communion with God: for this is common to the entire school of prophets, and, unless taken as an interpretation of the inner experience of the prophet, would involve the word of God in unseemly contradictions. There remain heights of revelation yet to be attained, after Amos and Hosea have done their work; the perfect knowledge of the One and Righteous God is not, with them, complete. Some may regard this as a loss—be that as it may; one thing, however, is sure—the stream of social idealism struck from these men's natures by their intense reaction upon the social corruption of their times will continue to pour forth with undiminished force. Rather, the volume and intensity of that current must be increased, as attention is concentrated upon this essential element in the work of Amos and Hosea, instead of being dissipated upon incorrect notions of their *theological* propaganda. That their reaction came to expression in connection with the abuse of ceremonial forms of worship is but incidental. Because it was in connection with the cultus that the diseased condition of the people came to a head, it was, therefore, into this ulcer that the prophets Amos and Hosea thrust the knife. Their



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THE PROPHETS

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The extreme left panel of Sargent's painting in the Boston Public Library

protest—and especially of Amos is this true—went forth mainly against the perversion of religious rites *because the whole life of the body politic was bound up in the implications of those rites*; the judicial system, the relations of landlord and tenant, of monarch and people, *all* these were affected, directly or indirectly, by the state of the cultus. A corrupt cultus meant a corrupt state, and a corrupt state meant a corrupt individual and a general condition of social inequity. To reform the cultus, to reform the relation to Jahweh, that was to strike at the roots of the problem, so far as lay in the prophets' power.

Hence it is somewhat of a mistake to expatiate upon Amos or Hosea as *theologians*, when their whole vision was concentrated upon actual social conditions, viewed in the light of what to them was the probable and controlling cause of the evil, namely, the perversion of the ceremonial relation to Jahweh. When the prophet said, "Get right with Jahweh," he said that because what he meant was *get right, through and through*, and that was his most radical and gripping way of saying, *get right*, words which, said in any other context than that given them by these prophets, would have been meaningless and sanctionless to the people to whom they were addressed. It is this tremendous and oftentimes terrible earnestness for righteousness which is always fundamental with Amos.

The situation in which Amos and Hosea stood takes on reality and life when viewed in correct historical perspective. They are no longer passive tools of deity, but passionate (if sometimes overwrought) men acting upon a situation that was tremendously real and tremendously in need of change; and this they did, with the ever-present consciousness of what Jahweh would demand, as his nature was conceived by them. If their voices are sometimes shrill it is because with much shouting they have not well succeeded in being heard. If they are intensely pessimistic, it is because the outlook which they faced was intensely black, whether looked upon as existing or to be anticipated. They lived in a situation in which the most revolting cruelty of warfare and invasion, either inflicted upon others or else to be endured, was a commonplace. Not only that, but the practice of cruelty and injustice, *within* the state, went on complacently and was to go on complacently,

for all the prophets' lashing and shouting. The basis of civilization was unsteady. The means of maintenance were insecure. But whatever their belief in the outcome of it all, of one thing these prophets were sure, namely, that *rightness* was necessary and was decreed by the will of God—and that anything short of the utmost rightness would not be tolerated by God. The mystical Figure with the plumb-line was seen on the wall; the foundation that was insecure would not be spared—God's justice was no less sure than gravitation.

There is tremendous moral dynamic here. The man who sees, in their right historical relation, these unswerving prophets, and hears them as they utter their living cry, will get his soul galvanized into action. He will be bound to react upon the social evil of his own day, as Amos and Hosea reacted upon the evil of their time. Moreover, the group morality of Amos and Hosea, their "each for all and all for each and the devil [Assyrian!] take the man who is only for himself"—this gospel of group-morality, when freed from its crudities, contains elements of essential value for us today, especially now that we are centering our attention upon the *world-group*. Conditions today are no less calculated than were those of thirty centuries ago to put the man of social vision upon his mettle. There is the old, old message to be delivered—expressed in new terms, of course; but the moral *power* enforcing the message must be the same. And that message still calls for the arm of Jahweh—strength that is felt to come from within will not be sufficient for the task. It will do no good to mince matters. The prophet of old, he did not mince matters—the stench of corruption was in his nostrils; he had a real problem to deal with and knew it; he had real convictions upon that problem; and he was willing to put those convictions into expression, at whatever cost. To touch the prophetic flame of Amos and Hosea is to have that fire kindled in us also, certainly to have it brought to more fervent and incisive expression. The *power* is there; it only remains for us to find and use it.

The arm of the modern prophet will need to be no less strong and his speech no less forcible than that of the prophet of old. The modern *variant* in the expression of prophetism will come, or should come, not in lessened force but in a new application, and

in a new spirit of optimism. Civilization is not upon the same basis, today, that it rested upon in Amos' or Hosea's time. It may be clearly seen, today, that if social and scientific forces are intelligently directed the outlook is by no means dark. It is no



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THE PROPHETS

The left-central panel of Sargent's painting

longer necessary for nations to war, to the death, over any fertile bit of land. With the intelligent application of our science to the forces of production, there is enough and more than enough "to go around." The obstacles confronting our civilization are by no means so obstinate, today, as they must have seemed to Amos and Hosea in their time. It seems, today, as if the world

were separated from the brightness of its hope only by a film of gossamer. That the film proves an elusive one, sometimes harder to be cut by the sword than the iron bar upon which Richard Lion-heart tried his strength, is not in itself a cause of deep discouragement, for the greater future can be *seen* from the mountains even if not fully possessed. The success of the modern prophetism will, therefore, as much depend upon its impregnable optimism as did the ancient prophets' propaganda upon the blackness of their word-pictures. "Millions for progress but not one penny for escape" is very nearly the watchword of the present generation. Upon rightly interpreting that trend of thought depends, to no small degree, the success of the modern prophet. And likewise, upon his ability properly to *relate* the prophet's ardor to the practical problems of the day. The modern prophet must not only be God-conscious; he must also understand his times. The voice "crying in the wilderness" must give place to that of the greater prophet who can point the way to the New Jerusalem—he is the man that is in demand. The day is past for any John Knox to come forth, without knowing wherefore or to what end, and cry, "Woe unto the bloody city of Litchfield! Woe unto the bloody city!" The effective prophetism of the present day must be no less *specific* than was the prophetism of Amos and Hosea, related to definite problems, and directed to ends that are—at least in part—realizable. It will not be sufficient merely to *denounce* the *kedeshah* and *kedeshim* (temple prostitutes—Hos. 4:14) of modern society; the way to their abolition must also be shown. It will not do merely to call attention to the commercialization of the public sources of recreation, by which pleasure is too often turned to excess because excess is commercially profitable. More than this, the "expulsive power of a new affection" must also be recognized and directed to application, lest the house that has been swept and garnished by restraint and abolition become the prey of seven-fold fiercer devils, for having been left empty. It will not be sufficient merely to stir men and women from their complacency; the energy aroused must be enlisted and harnessed in the great work of the Kingdom.

Ability, therefore, to point the way to welfare, rather than to adorn a tale of disaster, will be the prime prerequisite of the modern

prophet. That he has too often stopped with telling the tale of disaster means that he has misread his Amos and misinterpreted his Hosea, thinking them, perchance, mere creatures sent forth by Jahweh—"blind mouths"—to foretell the predestined course of wrath. That these prophets were *constructive* agents, aiming always at specific regeneration and specific reform and welfare, spite of all their threats of disaster—this, the would-be imitator of ancient prophetism has too often failed to grasp.

To sum up, then, some of the essential things to be borne in mind regarding the relation of the prophets Amos and Hosea to modern prophetism, it may be said:

First, Amos and Hosea were dealing with a problem which was "flesh of their flesh and bone of their bones," about which they had definite convictions and tremendous depth of feeling. Their pessimism was incidental, their idealism was fundamental and essential. They put their finger on the plague-spots and told what was necessary to be done; and they applied, for *getting the reform effected*, a transcendent but very real sanction—the will of Jahweh in relation to Israel. That this sanction was a communal one makes it, in its broader outline, all the more applicable to the social consciousness of the present day.

Second, the *modern prophet* is dealing with a problem which he must, first of all, *know*, as Amos and Hosea knew their problem; and about which he must, in the second place, *feel profoundly*, as Amos and Hosea felt their problem.

In the third place, the modern prophet must be *constructive* in that he not only points out the thing to be deplored, but also the thing needed for replacing it—as did Amos and Hosea, with their demand for right conduct instead of orgiastic ceremonial.

And in the fourth place, the modern prophet, standing upon the fuller truth of Jesus, must transcend Amos and Hosea in a broader recognition of "the expulsive power of a new affection," and in an optimism which is as appropriate to the dawn of the present era as was the pessimism of Amos and Hosea to the approaching downfall of the Jewish state. For, "all power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth"; to despair is to be disloyal, and to seek to drive men with the whip of fear rather than to draw them with the cords of hope, is to misinterpret the spirit of the Master.